

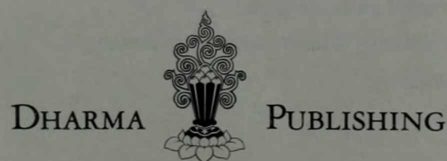
SACRED ART OF TIBET



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Tarthang Tulku

Introduction by Herbert V. Guenther



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Cover: MAHAKALA, *the protector and guardian of the Buddha's teachings.*
He transforms negative energy, subduing illusion by wrathful means.

Frontispiece: TARA (*Drol-ma*), *one of the special protectors of the Tibetan people.*
She saves those who pray to her from the eight great dangers.
Tara, or Savioress, was introduced into Tibet by Atisha in the tenth century
and is revered as the "Mother of All Buddhas."

Foreword

I am very happy to have this opportunity to share the tradition of sacred art in Tibet with so many people. This exhibition is the result of great efforts on the part of many friends who work with me, and I very much appreciate all their help. Two years ago we had a similar exhibition which was very successful. Once again I am glad that so many people can view these very sacred images, which still preserve something of the vanished religious culture of Tibet. In their homeland these images were considered very meaningful and powerful, and we believe that there is great blessing in just receiving them visually. It gives me a wonderful feeling to think of these sacred images going everywhere in people's minds and hearts.

The specific details of these images are very complex and of interest primarily to students of esoteric Tantric Buddhist practices. Unfortunately, very few people today can even explain their meaning. Mostly they correspond to various specific meditations, visualizations, and other advanced practices. We have attempted to explain these details generally in our introduction; by and large, the images have symbolical meaning related to the study of the human consciousness.

Hopefully in the future we will present a catalog which will include many prints in color as well as much longer and more detailed explanations. This time, unfortunately, we were too limited in time and funds for such a large undertaking. We strongly believe that the Tibetan tradition, where religion, art, and culture are closely bound together, has much to say to people suffering in the present age. May this exhibition, humble as it is, bring benefit to the lives of sentient beings.

Tarthang Tulku, Rinpoche
Head Lama, Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center

Acknowledgements

This collection of Tibetan art is an outcome of the Sacred Art of Tibet exhibition in 1973 at Lone Mountain College. Now we are reissuing this catalogue for our 1974 exhibitions. As always, this exhibition is the collective effort of many people who are united by their generosity and openness in helping us preserve the Tibetan culture. Through the associations we made with private collectors for the Sacred Art of Tibet exhibitions of 1970 and 1973, and in the generosity of many new collectors and museums, we have again assembled a unique collection of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Art. It is to the lenders that we are grateful. Without their kindness trust and willingness to participate, this exhibit would not be possible.

Encouragement and assistance for this catalogue came from many sources and in this respect we are especially grateful to Valrae Reynolds, Newark Museum; Bennet Bronson, Field Museum of Natural History; James Cahill, University of California Art Museum; David Roach, American Society for the Eastern Arts; Teresa Tse Bartholomew, Center for Asian Art and Culture; and Alex Nicoloff, Lowie Museum of Anthropology, for their advice and assistance. We especially wish to mention Fred Stross and Charles Oliver who donated their photographic services.

Introduction

The Development of Tibetan Art

The beginnings as well as the unfolding of Tibetan art are inextricably interwoven with the history and the geography of Tibet. History here is to be understood in the narrower sense of dated history, which begins around 600 A.D., when under the rule of the king Srong-btsan sgam-po (ascended the throne 634 and died 649 or 650) Tibet shared and even began to influence the destiny of the Asian nations.

Geographically Tibet was surrounded by countries having high levels of civilization. To the north lay a string of small oasis states whose inhabitants spoke an Indo-European language and whose religion was Buddhism. Among these oasis states Kucha upheld the Hinayana tradition, while Khotan adopted the Mahayana form of Buddhism and became the centre of the Avatamsaka teaching that spread and became the Hua-yen and Kegon schools in China and Japan respectively. Between 666 and 692 these central Asian oasis states were temporarily occupied by the Tibetans. Even when these states yielded to Chinese suzerainty, cultural links with Tibet remained until, in the ninth century, the Turks and, later, the Uighurs settled in these areas. Their names are associated with barbarity and violence.

To the west lay Ta-zig which, roughly, refers to Iran. Often linked or interchanged with Krom/Phrom (the east Iranian Hrōm or Frōm), which originally was the name for Byzantium and later was used to denote the Seljuks of Anatolia, this area of Ta-zig seems to have been the source for the carvings on the end beams situated under the entrance portico to the Jokhang. They are recumbent lions with human or animal heads. It is well known that the folklore of the lion comes from Iran.

There were other countries as well in this part of Asia: Gilgit ('Bru-sha in Tibetan), which has preserved the Midas theme that has been incorporated into their ancestry by the Bonpos; Kashmir, where Rin-chen bzang-po (958–1055) was sent to study. On his return he was active as a translator and founded several temples in Guge (dGu-ge)–Toling (Tho-ling, Tho-lding, mTho-lding) and, in all possibility, Tabo and Nako in Spiti. Then there was the ancient land of Gandhara with its Graeco-Roman (Hellenistic) art form; and Uddiyāna (Swat valley), home of Padmasambhava who, however, is also linked with the country of Zahor, sometimes located in northwestern India, sometimes in Bengal.

In the east was China which, at the time of the ancient Tibetan monarchy, was acquiring a new dynasty, the T'ang (618–906), which in its art soon was to display an incomparable vigour, realism, and dignity, while intellectually it soon became intolerant and formalistic, which may have been the contributary reason that Tibet was looking more towards India from which it is separated by formidable mountain ranges.

In the south was India with Nepal, developing a civilization of its own. In India proper, two centres were of particular importance for the Tibetans, the kingdom of Kanauj on the upper Ganges region in northwestern India under king Harsa, who promoted Buddhism, and Bengal where Buddhist Tantric ideas prevailed at a time when the Pāla kings had to pay tribute to Tibet around 755.

Since no culture develops in a vacuum, it is only natural that the art of Tibet reflects many traits that derive from the neighbouring civilizations. It also is an historical fact that the art of Tibet began when the country was politically rising and culturally receptive. And while it is correct to say that Tibetan art was 'influenced' by the art-forms and styles that prevailed in the countries around Tibet, it would be a mistake to understand 'influence' as mere 'imitation'. Rather, influence acted as a powerful stimulus, arousing creative activity. The rich material that flowed into Tibet was not merely received passively, but became the playground of free creative activity.

The bKa'-thang bde-lnga (a work that is said to have been rediscovered in 1347) has preserved the awareness of the Tibetans incorporating the art forms and styles developed by their neighbours. It records that, when the bSam-yas temple was built, the lower part was done in the Tibetan manner, while the middle part had a Chinese roof and the upper part an Indian roof. It is also stated in the same work that a castle to the Southeast of bSam-yas, built by king Mu-bhri btsan-po, was Tibetan in its ground floor, the two-roofed first floor Khotanese, the second Chinese, and the third Indian.



SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA

At the time of his supreme realization. His left hand symbolizes meditation while his right touches the earth as he overcomes the beautiful and terrifying apparitions of Mara, or illusion, which surround him.

This description, coming from a 'rediscovered' source, may not be quite reliable and it remains a problem how a Chinese roof could be built without walls or pillars, and be topped by an Indian roof. All that seems certain is that there were buildings that combined a purely Tibetan architecture with Chinese and Indian roof-styles. Also, the fact that the Indian roofing is said to top the Chinese one, may well reflect the change of emphasis which made India seem to be the greatest contributor. Still, we know that king Khri-gtsug lde-btsan (reigning 805–838 and signing a peace treaty with China in 821/2) invited skilled craftsmen from India, China, Nepal, Kashmir, and Khotan. He himself was particularly impressed by the Khotanese craftsmen and demanded their services at the threat of an invasion into Khotan. The tradition of the Khotanese art school lasted well into the 15th century. Its characteristic feature is the use of a fine weavy moustache in portraits and the representation of architectural groupings in a sort of bird eye's view.

The first flowering of Tibetan art in the fields of painting and sculpture took place in the 11th and 12th centuries in West Tibet where the king of Guge (dGu-ge), in particular, patronized the fine arts. Due to its geographical position, West Tibet became deeply indebted to the style of Kashmir, which itself was influenced by elements of art forms developed under the Pāla rulers (ca 730–1200) and under the preceding Gupta rulers (ca 300–600), thus combining both Eastern and Western art elements in India. The last phase of this West Tibetan style, found in Spiti, Guge, and Pu-rang, is connected with the monasteries and temples of Tsaparang (16th–17th centuries).

Equally important is the development in South Tibet which took place during the 14th and 15th centuries. The centre of Gyantse (rGyal-rtse) absorbed the Nepalese traditions which incorporated elements of Pāla art. This style is known as Beri (Bal-ris) or 'Nepalese style', which according to 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul (1813–1899) was the mainstream of Tibetan painting up to the 15th century.



1 AVALOKITESVARA

The Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion. He holds in his hands the indestructible jewel, the lotus, and prayer beads.

Lastly, the East Tibetan style must be mentioned. It was cultivated at Derge (sDe-dge) and the surrounding areas. In the first half of the 15th century, Sman-bla Dón-grub of Sman-thang in Lho-brag founded the Menri (Sman-ris) school which incorporated Chinese elements of the Mongol (Yüan) period, among them the elegant embroideries and tapestries.

The following century saw the rise of the Khyenri (mkhyen-ris) school, founded by 'Jam-dbyangs mKhyen-brtse'i dbang-phyug (born 1524). This style, too, makes use of Chinese elements in the representation of depth, the treatment of backgrounds, and the attention to detail. The school seems to have declined with the waning fortunes of the Sa-skya branch of Lamaism, and in the 17th century merged with the 'New Menri' (Sman-ris gsar-ma) school, which is attributed to Chos-dbyings rgya-mtsho (flourished between 1620 and 1665), and which, blending Khyenri, Gadri, and late Indian styles, is represented by the Lhasa or Central Tibetan style (dbus-bris) of the 20th century.

Out of the classical Menri school came the Gadri (sGar-bris) or Karma Gadri (Karma sGar-bris) school, which in its later phases shows the greatest Chinese influence. Its founder was Nam-mkha' bkra-shis (second half of the 16th century). The main features of this school were a distinctive use of colours and shading, and innovations in the treatment of backgrounds and compositions.

This account, of course, does not exhaust the art styles in Tibet. There were lesser schools, mostly derivative from the major styles and remaining more or less 'provincial'. But in spite of these many schools Tibetan art has not become fragmentary and styles and schools were subordinate to the content. This is due to the fact that Tibetan art was, and still is, basically a visionary art that is inseparable from the philosophical background of Mahāyāna Buddhism with its emphasis on man's spiritual growth that becomes accessible to an understanding through symbols. The complexity of Mahāyāna Buddhism is revealed in its Sūtras presenting the intellectual superstructure, and in its Tantras explicating the existential foundation and the growth of man towards true being and its appreciative awareness. The existential character of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a dynamic process is technically known as Vajrayāna—*vajra* being a symbol of the indestructible nature of Being, and *yāna* the symbol of the pursuit of Being. Thus, Tibetan art is representative of the Vajrayāna in particular, and, being visionary, it assists in bringing the things of this world into perspective, rather than subordinating or reducing them to fictitious schemata of mere postulates. Being 'existential' in the sense of communicating values and meanings that are intrinsic to Being and not arbitrarily assigned, the beauty of Tibetan art is not so much a quality, or characterizing particularity by which something is distinguished from and contrasted with something else; rather, as the 'manifestation' of Being, it adds, in manifesting itself, something that increases the charm and the value of Being and lets the beholder be fascinated by it.

Introduction to Tibetan Sacred Art

To appreciate Tibetan art one must appreciate himself, the fact of his being, the quality of his awareness and all that is manifested therein. Tibetan art is a part of this miraculous process of manifestation, not a comment on it or an attempt at an entertaining alternative to it. If one fully understands this art, then he is aware of being a Buddha in a Buddhafield. If one fully understands himself, then he is aware of being a Buddha in a Buddhafield.

In each case, then, and in all cases, what is constantly being "made manifest" is—Buddhahood. Can you see it? Can you be tricked into looking for it? There is no deceit intended by—or confusion involved in—the two assertions that: "All beings are already Buddhas." "All beings must strive to transcend their state of delusion and to become Buddhas." But if these statements only inspire confusion and uncertainty, then one may instead safely and confidently follow the path to Buddhahood illumined by Vajrayana art.

The Ground of Sunyata

The Sambhogakaya, of which this art is one aspect, bridges the distance between many apparently contradictory statements, between different levels of awareness and forms of existence, between the ultimate and the conventional. A very unique bridge, it *links* but does not *separate*. It manifests an essential connection without thereby individuating things or asserting that there exist things whose differences stand in need of reconciliation. The Sambhogakaya is not some subtle medium in which all entities are suspended. Rather, it is the *entities themselves* standing open and fully revealing themselves to an awareness that is aware of its and their "sunya" character.

Sunyata is an impish challenge to man's insistent desire to reify, to conceptualize, to classify, to discriminate. It refuses to give him an excuse to be lost in a sleep of fascination or limited awareness. It deprives him of any basis for his most gripping passions and his driving fears. Man's ego is alarmed by such a merciless foe, and declares its alarm to be a justifiable "fear of the void." But sunyata is not something in the first place, that it can be mistaken for something else, for a "void." It is nothing—nothing to possess specific properties, nothing to be possessed, nothing to understand or to achieve. Its greatest impudence consists in telling man that he is nothing too. In doing this, the sunyata doctrine is not to be taken as an insult to man, or a sinister attempt to impoverish him or his world. This doctrine points out that man's self, his mind and the objects of his attention are



2 GREEN TARA

A Sambhoghakaya emanation of Amitabha.
Green Tara is the most venerated female deity in Tibetan Buddhism.

all expressions of a field of limitlessly rich possibilities. Assertions that certain things exist, or that they possess a unique and independent self or essence that makes them exclusively what they are asserted to be, are only part of a selection and stipulation process. This process involves a specification of one type of awareness (rather than others), and of the type and extent of the world that one is to be aware of. If one realizes this, the world that is apparent is also manifestly the "ultimate" reality—there is no hidden or unactualized potentiality. If one does not, then the "world" is a trap in the very midst of paradise.

Unfortunately, verbal explanations are usually not enough for one to *realize* this. But Tibetan art, as an expression of the Sambhogakaya, does not need to *tell* one anything—it *demonstrates*. The sunyata doctrine urges man not to concretize his world into a container of solid, brittle "things." The Sambhogakaya is totally fluid and mutable. Sunyata warns us to choose freedom rather than traps. Unencumbered and unfettered, the Sambhogakaya is at play. If all boundaries and distances are sunya, then it would seem that unity is available to us, that we need not accept an imposed "separateness." The Sambhogakaya's compassionate action may comfort us in our isolation, revealing the fulfillment of connectedness and unity. Sunyata denies the need for "doing" and "achieving," and the existence of an independent "doer" who can be benefited. Without "doing" or changing anything, the Sambhogakaya's light reveals the sameness of the ultimate and the ordinary—its light *is* this "sameness." The logic of sunyata exposes the relativity of such concepts as "space" and "time." With direct experience of the Sambhogakaya, one transcends these relativities. Although we have been emphasizing the Sambhogakaya as *showing* what the doctrine of sunyata implies, sunyata can and must also be experienced directly, and is itself the basis of the Sambhogakaya's action. If we wish to distinguish them, we may say that sunyata and the Sambhogakaya are mutually complementary. Even a little understanding of one will render the other more accessible to us, which in turn will deepen our understanding of the former.

Vajrayana Tantric Art

The foregoing discussion is fundamental to the methods, purpose and nature of Vajrayana thanka art. The art and its associated practices were consciously developed according to these two insights, and literally embody both of them without distorting their significance. Tibetan art is therefore not merely a prelude or preliminary to meditation on the Sambhogakaya or sunyata. Form and color may express the "emptiness" of sunyata, and may do so at least as well as some insipid blank. A painted scroll, if properly understood, need not "tone down" or hamper the endlessly pervasive expression of the Sambhogakaya. Instead of extrapolating beyond the given, of searching behind and beyond appearance for the ineffable,

one would do well to just look—even at a thanka. This is a good place to begin, even if it is true that there remains much to be discovered.

As an initial example of the influence of the Sambhogakaya and of sunyata in and on thanka art, we may consider the art's representational style. The element of space is used to suggest a total openness of possibility as to what may happen, and where. Light either lacks any specific source—coming from everywhere—or emanates from the thanka's central figures in such a way that their existence and their qualities are naturally revealed in their light, and are revealed wherever this light extends throughout the infinite space they dwell in. These figures or beings emerge, as it were, from nowhere, from anywhere. They appear to lack foundation or origin. They consequently appear to lack any restrictions on what they may become or what they may accomplish. What transformations may they not undergo? What transformations may they not effect in us? Mutable in form and free in their scope of action, their radiant presences communicate to us by awakening us to the realization that we too are free in a field of open possibilities. "Your awareness may also be expressed in endless forms in endless worlds," they say.

It must here be pointed out that the technique of seeing the world as phantasmagorical or apparitional is quite distinct from seeing it as empty of restrictions on being, knowing and compassionate intercession. The former can be an effective means of disentangling one's self from a world created by delusive projections. The latter, however, discovers in the world of appearance the source and actualization of all meaning and value. It is not a technique or lesson of any kind, and has no goal beyond itself—it is fulfillment. Remarkably enough, it is open to us to adopt this enlightened vision, to use it to bring our lives into focus. This focus destroys the double-vision which makes our goal and our path appear separate. We are freed to take all paths as invitations to an effortless and all-accomplishing non-doing. As we employ the Buddha's vision, we perfect it.

Explorations into the avenues revealed by this mutability of form and freedom of expression are not games or escapes for a neurotic mind. The extent of our realization of this freedom and of our ability to utilize this mutability corresponds exactly to the degree of our selflessness and our compassion. Complete freedom comes only with the maturation of an enlightened attitude into the omniscience of Buddhahood. Both before and after the dawn of this awakening, our freedom may only be meaningfully used in communicating itself to others. In this way, the light of the Sambhogakaya may also stir others in their turn to awaken.

Such themes of thanka art as the mutability of form may be mistaken or misused in many ways. Even if we understand and act in accordance with its true meaning, we may easily fall prey to a subtle attachment to it. Rather than taking it as merely one step towards Buddhahood, as one example of what thanka art offers, we may take it as the standard for all that we find in the art. But the Sambhogakaya does not span all the distances we create, and thwart our best attempts at clinging to egoistic responses, merely



to lead us to a long-term infatuation with some realization—even a genuine one. Nor does thanka art exist merely to serve up some "truth" to us in a quaint or colorful manner. In preference to *this* attitude, it might almost be better to maintain that the art does not exist for any *purpose* at all, and that it recommends the same course to us. It advises us to give up the childish pretend-games of "being-in-order-to," and to learn to just *be*. These cautionary remarks should be applied to whatever we subsequently say about what Vajrayana art is or does.

Beauty as a Manifestation of the Ultimate

Man has at his disposal two ambassadors who help him negotiate the subtle entrance through Tibetan art into the Sambhogakaya realm. One is beauty, and the other is a cultivated mindfulness of sunyata. The art's beauty spurs us to action, and inspires us to seek the highest goals we know of at a given time. Sunyata tempers our approach, forestalling our crude rush towards ethereal goals. It reminds us of the emptiness of self, subject, object and "achieving." It further points out that beauty is also "empty," and that if it is objectified into something that may be possessed, it will be lost. Beauty is only that particular aspect of appearance that we readily accept as a manifestation of the ultimate in our world. Having once been aroused by it, we should learn to extend our awe and reverence to all aspects of appearance as being equally expressive of an ultimate reality. When we've learned to do this, then we truly awaken to beauty, to the sort of beauty that is the Vajrayana's specific concern. We also awaken to a much deeper understanding of sunyata. Sunyata

3 TSONG-KA PA
20th Century, Daramsala

Tsong-Ka Pa is in the center with his two greatest disciples Kedrub Je (right) and Gyaltsab Je (left). Kedrub Je was most learned in the tantras while Gyaltsab Je was foremost in the Sutras. Manjugosha (above) is an emanation of Tsong-Ka Pa. On Manjugosha's right is Tsong-Ka Pa again and on his left is Jowo Atisha who started the Kadampa sect which Tsong-Ka Pa reformed. Clockwise from there are Tsong-Ka Pa enthroned, Dombhipadaja Arahasiddha, Dorje Shug Dan, Vaisravana, Mahakala, Vamaraja, Palden Lha-Mo, Tsong-Ka Pa on an elephant, and Manjughosha. The thanka is new and portrayed in the Mongolian style.

is far more than a device or doctrine for regulating our behavior. The beauty that first attracts us and the sunyata that cautions our initial efforts towards spirituality are not the highest beauty, the ultimate sunyata. Only with this in mind may we correctly interpret the statement: "If we understand the right way to look, everything is seen as beauty." The "beauty" referred to here is not that which beckons and entices. The right way of seeing is not merely a stubborn determination to like everything, or to overlook things which threaten to appear as negations.

The Nature of the Deities in Tibetan Art

As an essentially religious art, Vajrayana art must in some way be concerned with such notions as "the unsatisfactoriness of worldly existence" and "salvation." Now it is a commonly observed fact that man, when confronted by the need to choose between these two states, is often given to clownishly extreme antics. He tries to forcibly seize and cling to some "salvation" and, failing that, totally surrenders himself to a blind faith that a certain savior or doctrine will somehow carry him through. To some degree or other, many people follow this pattern. Our discussion of the Vajrayana and its art may suggest some reasons why the Vajrayana does not lend itself to such crude treatment, and why, on the other hand, it may harmlessly accommodate it. Tibetan art supplies the devotee with objects which, considered in the light of the sunyata doctrine, may be "taken" without thereby augmenting the ego's greed, and with deities to whom (as Sambhogakaya manifestations) one may give one's self without creating an unhealthy dependence. In this case, any over-enthusiasm on the devotee's part does not result in an exhaustion or degradation of either him or of the deity involved. One is not expected to fixate on—or slavishly surrender to—these deities. But regardless of one's initial stance, the subtlety of understanding and depth of experience expressed in these images and their attendant practices will sustain one through a vast range of discoveries.

4 CELESTIAL BEING

A deva ascends back to the celestial realm carrying the freshly cut hair of the future Buddha as a relic of his enlightenment.



The curse of man's ordinary mind is his engagement in the activity of warping reality into a polarized subject-object field. Most "objects" of such an awareness only perpetuate this condition. Thanka art, however, supplies us with "objects" which actually heal this separation. At first we will necessarily view them as objects, but as our meditation progresses we may well reverse positions, according them the status of "subject." Eventually we cannot help but give up such fictional posturings altogether. Since it should be obvious how the doctrine of sunyata, with its denial of any absolute basis for boundaries, "essence-difference," or relative positions is influential in our dropping this duality, we may now concentrate more exclusively on the significance of the deities in thanka art. These deities will help us surprise and unmask that nimble contortionist who delights in a solo playing of the "knower," "knowing" and the "known." The sunyata doctrine warns us that he and his drama are not what they seem to be...thanka art reveals the full import of this warning.

The Practice of Visualization

In the beginning of our efforts at meditation, however, we cannot be quite so concerned with revelations. The problem of dealing with the lazy, dull and vicious qualities of our immature minds presents itself as being in much more immediate need of consideration and treatment. As the first of its many ministrations on our behalf, meditation or visualization involving Vajrayana art both points out the full extent of this problem and supplies us with the proper remedy. Grasping, ignorance and tightness are most clearly exposed when contrasted with unlimited openness, knowing and compassion. The shabbiness of a way of life characterized by the former qualities is starkly pin-pointed in the light of one replete with the latter. On the other hand, the only way to forsake the one way of life and take up the other is to *begin*, and to begin on the level from which all qualities derive—the level of the mind. The Vajrayana therefore places great emphasis on the practice of visualization, of mentally embracing and eventually realizing a oneness with the deities introduced to us by thanka art. A precise correspondence exists between the forms, colors and postures of these deities and the types of awareness which they are considered to manifest. Our bodies are the embodiments of our characteristic human consciousness, and so too are Vajrayana deities the embodiments in sensible forms of "divine" awareness. Both this quality of "divinity" and its corresponding forms are quite accessible to us—by entertaining and perfecting these forms in our own consciousness, we may actualize the awareness and virtues which these deities present to us. It is in this sense that we *become* them, and it is by implementing this "becoming" that the deities first speak to us in the Sambhogakaya fashion. At a certain point in this process of self-perfection, however, we may become worthy recipients of the transcendent revelation that we already *are* the deities, that there has never been a time even in our most black or vicious moods when the deities and their qualities were not fully actualized by us and fully exemplified by our every thought and act. This is the

ultimate realization offered by Vajrayana practice, and the ultimate sense in which the Sambhogakaya communicates to us...it awakens us to what first appears as the *path* to perfection, but what is actually our complete and ever-abiding perfection itself. Since we are preoccupied with unsatisfactoriness, we welcome the Sambhogakaya as a remedy. Since we are involved in doing and appropriating, we eagerly respond to the Sambhogakaya as being a call to "great" doing and appropriating. It is really neither of these. Visualization practice does not, therefore, merely involve putting a new mask over our old ego—we *are* changed and perfected by it, until we are tempered and strong enough to make the great leap to the realization that all such notions as "changing," "remaining unchanged," "virtue" and "vice" are "empty." Like momentary spots before our eyes, they should not tempt us, to abandon the beauty of our lives in order to pursue or avoid them. Thanka deities reside fully at ease and in harmony with their world—their *presence* is their "doing."

We exist in a world of causes and effects. It is therefore inevitable that our initial interchange with the Sambhogakaya influence follow this same format. The relation between the visually perceived characteristics of a given deity and the quality of awareness that is at first nurtured by meditation on these characteristics is a "causal" one, in about the same sense that any thoughts are said to "cause" other thoughts or to mold personalities and world-views. On this level of visualization practice, a kind of psychological science is at work. However, the final and transcendent realization is eternally uncaused, and reveals that types of awareness, their associated manifestations and these manifestations' evocative power all have sunyata as the ultimate source and basis of their relationship.

These general remarks should make several things clear. The incredible numbers and variety of deities in Tibetan art do not make up a "religious pantheon" (as this term is ordinarily understood), and do not derive from a desire to invent a complex imaginary world for us to lose ourselves in. It is often somewhat heatedly asked: "Well just what *is* the status of such deities?" In reply, we may first point out that these deities are *here for us*. Since we exist, they become manifest. Since we exist *as we do*, they become manifest *as they do*. Our state of confusion and misery makes necessary and inevitable (since they are aspects of ourselves) their appearance as revealing what we persist in overlooking. It is, perhaps, silly to question the status of such "divine messengers" and at the same time to naively accept the dreary and confining status that man appears to have. If we are stubborn enough to enact only a tiny part of our true potential and to accept only a section of a much larger field, then we should not be surprised if the "exalted remainders" are equally stubborn in thrusting themselves upon our attention. Thanka deities, then, do not exist independently of us and our qualities...they are relevant to us in such a way that, while they do not indulge our old games and habits, neither do they lead us on a course which ignores the "facts of life." They are neither inventions for fun nor vehicles for escape. They do not *need* to be invented, they are a direct and uncontrived response to our condition. Do they "exist?" What is their ontological status? In reply to these questions, perhaps it should be asked: "What is the ontological status of a *way of being*?" For, Vajrayana

deities embody *ways of being*, not *things*. Nor are these ways merely potential, awaiting instantiation in the world—they are already fully active. Vajrayana visualization practice does not involve a three-term relation between a man, a tantric deity and some thing which this deity and this meditation are instrumental in helping him become. Visualization does not involve a relation between *things* at all. We are accustomed to think in terms of a fixed picture according to which some "things exist." The Vajrayana is not interested in adding some new things to the list of existents; rather, it urges us to give up our preoccupation with "things" altogether, and to also either give up this picture or to realize that it is—just a picture. Tantric Buddhist deities are admittedly not "things" that are



5 AMITAYUS YAB-YUM

Amitayus is the Sambhoghakaya reflex of Amitabha who is seated above. Amitayus is visualized in this form as part of the sadhana, or religious practice associated with him.

limited to "existing" in a so-called objective world, but then, neither are human beings. Without any break, interruption or hardening into isolated things, awareness opens unto awareness, spanning all the possible realms of experience. To visualize is to consciously dwell in this continuum. Tantric deities exist, therefore, in a way that it is also important for human beings to exist in. They are known by the same means and in the same manner that we know ourselves *as human beings*. In fact, knowing them may help us to know ourselves in this manner. Speaking pragmatically, we may say that their utility consists in guiding us until we reach the realization that *they* are not tools and that *we* have no ends that need to be furthered. Thus we learn to respect both them and ourselves.

The Ultimate Nature of the Deities

Although responding to our situation and appearing in forms that encourage our access to them, the forms and actions of Vajrayana deities are also equally governed by these deities' participation in ultimate reality. They are glorious and awesome, therefore, not merely in contrast and as a remedy to man's inglorious and dismal predicament, but because ultimate reality *is* glorious and they are not separate from it. It is often said that thanka art points to a "hidden reality." This reality is hidden to ordinary human vision, but is still not divorced from our human nature. Vajrayana visualization practice teaches us to see it by first seeing the art with our mind's eye, then through all our other senses, then with our energy center (cakras) and finally by taking every element of our being and our world as *seeing*. What once was hidden then becomes clearly revealed. We cannot see the whole of reality by exerting just a part of ourselves, but only by summoning everything that we are. This suggests the kind of involvement that we must bring to the deities and worlds of thanka art. It is not sufficient that we relate to them merely as being responses to a part of our total situation, and as cut off from their relation to ultimacy. If we are willing to give them all of our attention, and to allow them as vast a range of significance as is their due, then we may fully experience the enrichment afforded by this art. Since we are usually determined to devalue appearance, to find its value as being above or behind it rather than in it, we tend to interpret thanka deities as pointing beyond themselves. In reality, they only point beyond our initial comprehension of them.

The Deities as Guides to Perfection

Thanka art and its deities are effective, but what do they effect? They interact with man and for him, but what does man need? In meditating upon the deities and upon our identity with them, we are not trying to become, to restructure or to change anything. Thanka deities are not showing us something to be—our nature is that of sunyata, not

that of a *substance* which can be molded, added to or subtracted from. Furthermore, suggestions that these deities show us what we *are*, only trigger more inappropriate responses—"Oh, am I really the same as these divine beings? How nice!" Divine inspiration must of necessity be very subtle. It must guide us to perfection without encouraging us to fall into more "doing," and must lead us to appreciate what we are without merely titillating our egos. Much of Vajrayana practice therefore consists in very strenuous efforts that remain grounded in a "pre-view" of ultimate truth, in the assurance that nothing will or needs to really change. Among the many things that we may believe about ourselves and our purposes, there are perhaps a few that are tentatively suitable for visualization practice. We begin with ideas about ourselves, the deity and our goal that have no validity and no other value than their capacity to rouse us to set to work. If we are fortunate, however, before we attain our initially cherished goal we will instead wake up to a new understanding of who we are. At this point, we will no longer *believe* ourselves to be anything. In fact, we will be quite sure that we are nothing (sunya). At this point true Vajrayana practice begins, and proceeds with our having no purposes or intentions, whilst engaging our energies and attention in such a manner that all our latent tendencies toward ignorance or imperfection fall away. We work until some part of us "knows." Then we dwell in this insight and allow our continued action and attention to purify themselves until we are "all-knowing."

It is the special quality of the deities' power and character that enables our attunement to them to accomplish such an effortless and unconcerned purification. The deities naturally appear in such a way that their appearance calms our inclination toward confusion, shows us the perfection of which this confusion is but an inversion, and simultaneously *is* the perfection itself. However, as soon as we outgrow the disposition to seek abstract realities which need to be illustrated or represented, and to isolate conditions which we feel need to be healed or transformed, we perceive the deities quite differently. Both they and we are understood as naturally self-sufficient. Again, any remaining vestige of delusion on our part immediately recasts the deity in its role as illustrator or healer, which it then plays very effectively. This process continues until there is nothing left in us that needs to be convinced...further offers of revelations and assistance do not tempt us. The deities do not come here from some other world—they have always been with us. They are anchored partly in our need and partly in our perfection, and are appropriate manifestations for either condition.

One practices the Vajrayana with the intention that everyone will benefit from his labors. This intention is built into the practice in many ways, and is certainly fundamental to the idea and execution of visualization. The deities are visualized not just from the limited point of view of our ego and our position, but in such a way that they extend their promise of enlightenment to all sentient beings. One must learn to experience the deities as though everyone is simultaneously experiencing them with him. In this way, one is taking a step toward truly communicating with a deity in the Sambhogakaya fashion, where each "speaker" is expressing his participance in the totality of what is real. A more

elementary purpose to this, however, is simply to force the ego to relinquish its hold on perception, to "purify appearance." Of course appearance does not really need to be purified or enriched, but we must still aspire to strike up a proper relationship with it. For most men, appearance is obscured and laden with ego-projections. In such a state, our world, our body, and our perceptions cannot provide ego-transcending objects for our meditation, and must temporarily be replaced by an "expanded vision" of the worlds, deities and qualities of awareness depicted in thanka art. If we develop the power of meditation in order to obtain what we imagine we need and to perfect the persons we believe ourselves to be, we are imprisoning ourselves in our own delusions. Meditation is harmful in the absence of a correct point of departure. By relating to appearance from the point of view of a tutelary deity, we avoid further scribbling on a picture that's already overworked, and use our awareness to promote integration and harmony instead. The worlds conveyed in thanka art offer us great freedom to explore, to rediscover the newness and open possibilities of our environment. At the same time, they provide us with a firm guidance that prevents our explorations from degenerating into egoistic flights of fancy. Thanka art's great science consists in the generation of elements which can only prompt one to develop that maturity. As long as we carry our limitations with us into the deity's realm, the brilliance and beauty of that realm will elude us. This art meets us at our own level and grows in significance precisely as we grow in penetrating clarity of mind. At various times it may offer us a play-pen in which we may experiment without hurting ourselves, a training ground in which we may perfect our awareness, and a field of activity from which we carry out our intention to awaken all beings to enlightenment. It thus sustains us through each of the three stages in our development toward Buddhahood. The creative vision involved in this development is the liberating expression of the Sambhogakaya itself, not some grandiose production of the imaginative faculty which is the very source of our delusion. This is not to say that man plays no part in the generation of this vision—he must have a much greater involvement in it than he does in his fantasies. The meditator never forgets that the entire process of maturing to enlightenment begins, proceeds and ends in sunyata.

Consecration by the Deities

Ancient texts on Buddhist art declare that the deities never enter forms other than those of the prescribed proportions, with their numerous designating marks. We may understand this to mean that religious depictions cannot introduce us to the Sambhogakaya action unless they are executed so as to correspond exactly to both ultimate reality and to the specific way in which human beings must approach and grasp it. Every aspect of our existence may be restored to its proper significance and dignity through the agency of thanka art. When we therefore invite a particular deity to consecrate us and our world, this being a request that he invest us with his qualities and ways of being, the art shows us what

we should expect. The deity's body is made exactly to the proportions and attitude that unmistakably convey his particular kind of awareness to us. Our own bodies are often experienced as limiting or acting in opposition to our minds, and as standing as a barrier to mutual understanding and recognition among us and our fellows. The deity's body is "all of a piece"—it's understood to be equally aware and "knowing" in each of its parts. Our bodies are conglomerates of specialized parts whose different functions tend to confuse and distract us. Whereas we are engaged in helter-skelter doing, the deity is in vibrant repose. For us, light is a precious gift from outside (above) us, and which we depend upon to reveal our location and status in an uncertain world. What is not alight is unknown and



feared. The deity radiates his own light, which is uniquely expressive of his character and which illumines the entirety of his world, every direction being an unfolding of his own vast possibilities. (Very often, space only emphasizes our feeling of smallness and inadequacy.) We are plagued by isolation from others and alienation from ourselves. He, on the other hand, manifests his completeness in ecstatic embrace with his essential nature. Whereas we cling to objects, his consort in this embrace is sunyata. While we are even inclined to fix upon him as an object, his awareness is directed totally outwards from its sunya-center, that all sentient beings may attain to this center. A thorough and minute correspondence obtains between us in our world and his being in his own. In this way, appearance may be reinstated to its primordial splendor.

Once we have developed some understanding of the deity's mode of being and its relevance to us, and have freed ourselves of some of our more constricting associations, we may extend the visualization to include our own bodies and perceptions. At this point, the work of stabilizing appearance in its essential sanctity may proceed very quickly. Our emotions, our senses and their objects, our perceptual categories, space and time, all reveal their one-valueness, the ground for both Buddhahood and bondage. If the deity grants us his empowerment, we will experience it to extend through the present moment to every moment of our past and future, through all other beings and all their pasts and futures. The entire round of rebirth and causation will be laid bare of sunyata.

6 GUHYA SAMAJA

18th Century, Central Tibet

Guhya refers to the representation of outer, inner and secret. Guhya is the Sanskrit word for secret or perfectly internal. This is because the Anutara Tantra class to which this deity belongs is the secret or perfectly internal tantra. Vajrayana Buddhism contains within itself practices which do not necessitate changes in the outward form of the practitioner. One who is accomplished in the perfectly internal Tantras may seem on the outside to be no different from any ordinary man, but on the inside he is a perfectly accomplished yogi. Above Guhya Samaja is Dharmaraja Tri Song De Tsan who invited Padma Sambhava to Tibet, while below is Mahakala.

There is nothing that is changed by this great course. Appearance, our ordinary understanding of it and our common reactions to it are all the ultimate reality. And yet, we may need the art to see this. In fact, to learn to appreciate the full richness of appearance, we need an art that is comparably rich, one that does not exhaust itself in lame attempts to capture some aspect of appearance. Vajrayana art is the very quintessence of appearance, where all appearance is understood to be a call to transcendence. We might say that there is no limit to the levels of philosophical and yogic meanings expressed in every detail of thanka art. But it must be emphasized that this art is not merely a container of such profound knowledge, and does not exist solely in order to convey it. The knowledge is there because the art is not separate from the reality it brings to our attention...the art, the reality, are complete. Thanka art has many levels of significance because it is alive to the possibilities inherent in each of our moments and perceptions, and brings these possibilities to light for us. Significance is not "stored" in the art, nor are the art's elements only *stipulated* to possess it. If one tries to "retrieve" the art's meaning in the same manner that one fathoms a phrase by referring to a dictionary, only a mockery of the Vajrayana's true import will result. If we are ready to live in our full potential, finding meaning in our every experience, the art may teach us a great deal.

The Significance of the Deities

Depending upon one's character, his level of maturity at the time of beginning the Vajrayana path and the turns that his ego takes in fleeing the inevitable ascendancy of Buddhahood, one will find reason to invoke the aid of various particular deities. As our responses to meditation practice change, the qualities of different deities may be used to advantage in maintaining the balanced perspective upon which continued progress depends. Not all practice consists in ego-taming, however. It is quite possible for us to reach a plateau from which our time is better spent in exploring reality's deepest mysteries than in further beating worn-out ego structures. At this point too, there are specific deities who may assist our development.

Sakyamuni Buddha set in motion the dharma wheel which unfailingly counteracts delusion by generating innumerable enlightened men and enlightening doctrines. Depictions of Him help affirm our basic orientation throughout a many-sided course of development.

The arhats exemplify the refinement of character which Sakyamuni stressed as the foundation for enlightenment.

As the models for all Bodhisattvas, Avalokitesvara, Manjusri and Vajrapani exhibit limitless compassion, wisdom, resourcefulness and power in their selfless efforts to awaken all beings to Buddhahood.

Having attained to the supreme comprehension of reality, the Mahasiddhas reveal reality's spontaneity and power in their every act. Their "siddhi" (often misleadingly translated as "power") consists in their having throroughly experienced the ultimate in every aspect of appearance. They are blissful not because they have succumbed to pleasure-seeking but because the fullest expression of the ultimate in man is "Great Bliss" (Mahasukha).

Representations of Padma Sambhava and of the long lineage of human gurus in Tibet who preserve His teaching, all direct our attention to the source of the Vajrayana's energy on our level of existence. Since they also taught and granted blessings directly from a state which transcends space and time, we may still approach and learn from them.

We are inspired to follow these lineage teachings to their conclusion by dakinis who, as embodiments of an understanding of sunyata, are beautiful to behold but are entirely sunya in nature. So must we understand all appearance to be beautiful, where beauty is an invitation to the full experience of sunyata.

Standing astride the corpses (portrayals of "deadening" influences) of the sleep-inducing attitude of eternalism and the "souring" doctrine of nihilism, the wrathful deities fling off all the limiting shackles of the ego. The ego is tight and small but they are free and unbridled—they trample and burn away even the most deeply entrenched remains of ignorance, lust and hatred. Their purpose is not to activate emotional ego-responses such as fear, but to *open* us. No Vajrayana art derives its power or meaning from stirring up emotional impulses of any kind. Wrathful deities, therefore, are not creatures of vengeance who punish us for our wrong-doings, or our enemies for their disagreeableness.

Dhyani Buddhas unravel what is for us the impenetrable mystery of the omniscient Buddhamind. They obligingly stand as separate Buddhawisdoms while we become attuned to them individually, until we finally effect their synthesis to regain the irreducible and pristine awareness of which they are the Sambhogakaya manifestations.

Tutelary deities maintain a most intimate relationship with us, fostering our development until that time when they bid us to draw near to them and to the knowledge that we and they share the same essential nature. They bequeath us the heritage of their own unsurpassable patterns of being and knowing, proving beyond question that we may realistically adopt them.

Mandalas of vast arrays of peaceful and wrathful tutelary deities, dakinis and Dhyani Buddhas, provided that we are given the key to their inner significance, put to rest our fears that our minds, perceptions, bodies and world are fragmented and bewildering. There are no "loose ends" that need to be retrieved or accounted for. A mandala places us squarely in the midst of an harmonious unfolding of all beings, Buddhas, and realms, from a center that loses track of nothing and explains everything.

The primordial Buddha Samantabhadra oversees this unfolding of myriad forms, beings, deities, conflicts and resolutions...He is unconcerned, even with the reflection that there has never been a departure from perfection, never an isolated sentient being or Buddha. "His" overview and unconcern with narrow views and pretenses are simply features of that experience of enlightenment which is open to everyone.

The Vajrayana considers its art to be very sacred. Such terms as "sacred" sometimes elicit ridicule rather than reverence, since they are taken to designate objects which must, under pain of censure, be regarded with no attempt at critical evaluation and with strained piety. Vajrayana art has great power to effect profound transformations in our level of consciousness, and in pointing to a "divine" realm it clearly indicates our own value and significance as human beings. It is therefore easy to respect this art, just as it is easy to respect ourselves, and deliberate attempts *not* to do so make no more sense than does masochism.

In what way does aesthetic appreciation differ from other sorts of appreciation? And what is "art," what is its purpose, which class of things are to be taken as art, and for what reasons is something to be taken as "good" art? Vajrayana philosophy has very definite answers to these questions, at least for its own art. It also makes fully possible what for other aesthetic traditions remains an unrealized dream . . .the moment of appreciation, during which art's message" and our own experience merge in the light of a deeply felt personal comprehension of a universal insight, may be infinitely extended by Vajrayana practice. The art and the world of our experience inform and enrich each other until an all-inclusive continuum of understanding is established.

Tiring of abortive attempts to specify the exact extension of the class of "art" objects, some Western artists and aestheticians play with the notion of accepting everything as being "art". Unfortunately, they find it very difficult to do this in any nontrivial or interesting way. They have an equally hard time reconciling the belief that art should reveal "profound truths" with the assertion that in no case should we look beyond the "given," concerning ourselves with meta-perceptual ends. The Vajrayana does not find these points to be quite so problemmatic. It teaches a very sophisticated technique which involves accepting all objects and perceptions as "art." And to anyone who has fully mastered the Vajrayana path, nothing could be more obvious or more profound than the discovery that everything *is* art, and is art for no other reason than that everything is what it is...that is enough.

Catalogue of Plates

In these brief descriptions of the thankas and rupas, we decided not to delve immediately into the more esoteric aspects of Tibetan art and religion. At the outset, long intellectual explanations tend to lessen the depth of emotional impact that color and form—devoid of rational categorization—can provide.

A visual presentation of sacred subjects such as this allows the senses to experience the art directly. While explanations as to implements, attributes, symbologies, tantras, colors and mandalas are important for a total appreciation of this art, the purpose of this catalogue is simply to present an introduction to Tibetan sacred art coupled with accurate scholarship, and to provide both immediate aesthetic appreciation and an avenue for further study.

Note: All diacritical marks have been left off the Sanskrit, and all Tibetan has been spelled phonetically.

7 LORD BUDDHA

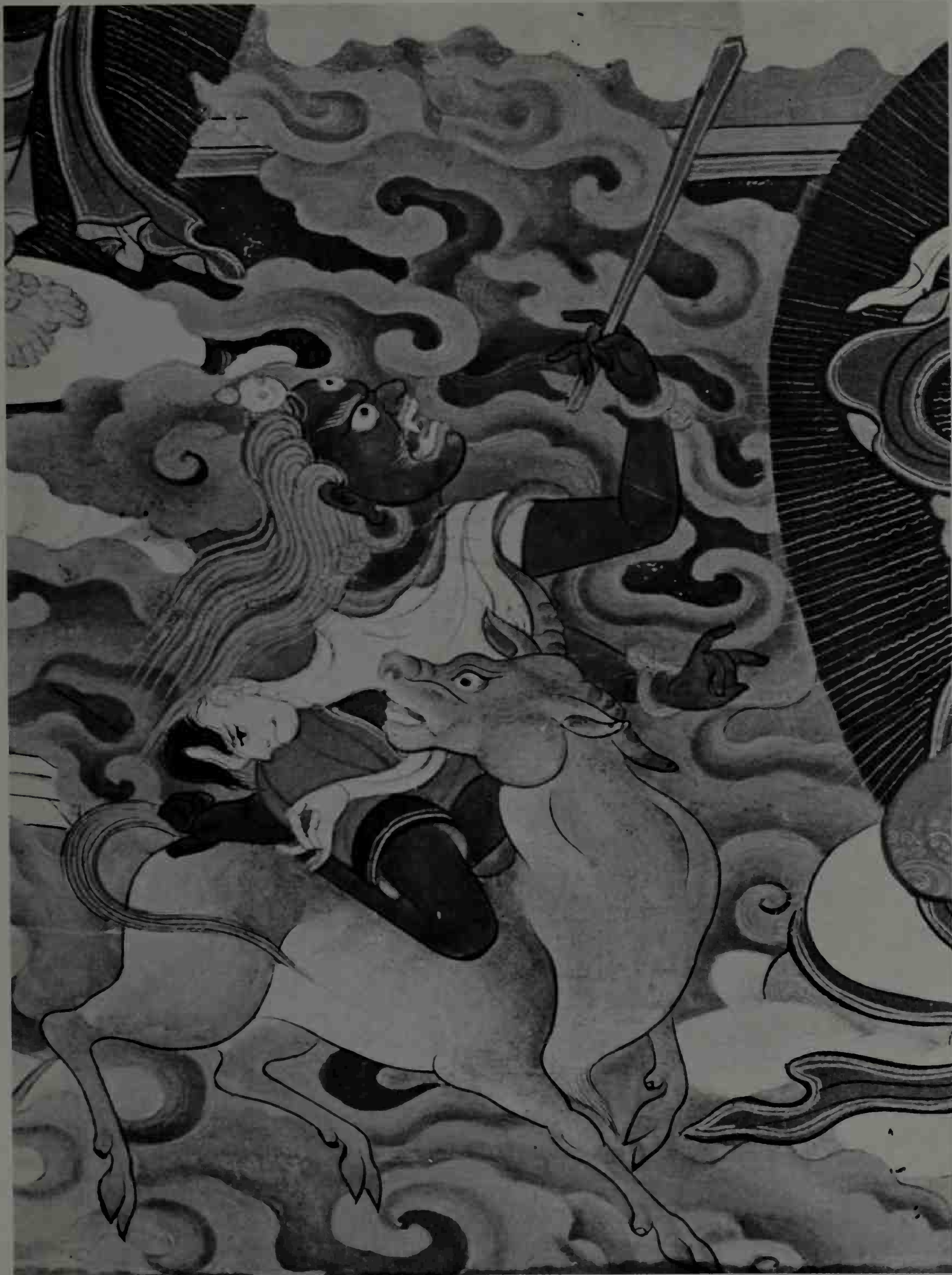
18th Century, Central Tibetan

Lord Buddha is represented in the "bestowing mudra." Overhead is the Panchen Rinpoche, probably Lozang Yeshe Palden, who lived in the 18th Century. His disciples surround him and all represent great scholars of the Gelugpa Sect. Below Lord Buddha is Vaishravana. To the left of Lord Buddha is an emanation of Manjushri who represents perfect wisdom and to the right is an emanation of Samantabhadra who represents perfect activity born of perfect Wisdom. Below him is another emanation of Samantabhadra and beneath Manjushri is Vasanta Rajni, a female Dharmapala.





7a. Detail of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva

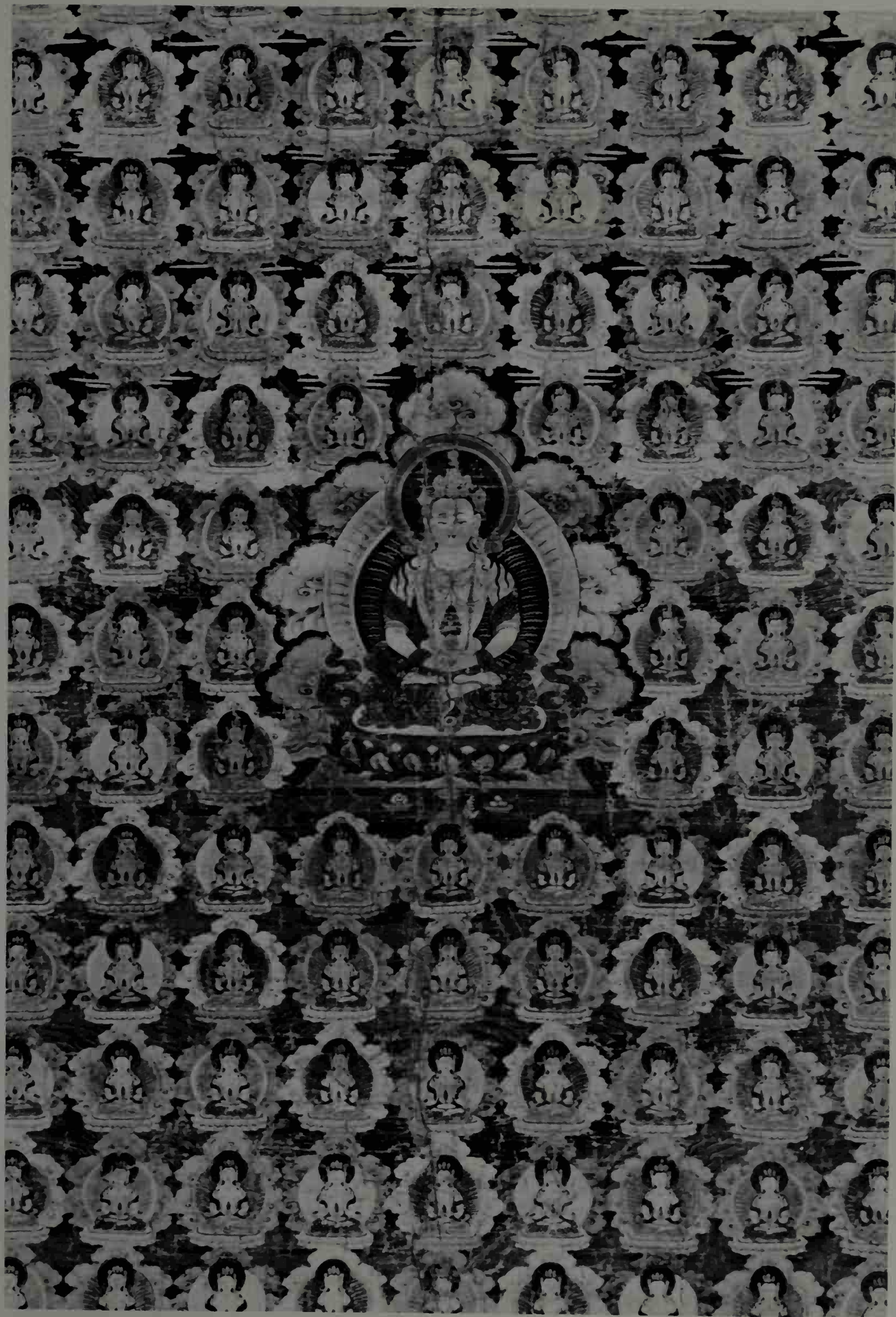


7b. Detail of Vasanta Rajni

8 AMITAYUS

18th Century, Kham

Amitayus, a very important manifestation of Amitabha, the Buddha of Boundless Light, is portrayed in Sukhavati, or the Western Paradise, a place where those who have sincere belief in Amitabha can be reborn.
In Sukhavati all conditions are perfect for spiritual progress. Amitabha and his reflex Amitayus are the spiritual sources from which Avalokitesvara and Tara emanate. As such they are the guiding principles of much of Tibetan religion.
All the Buddhas surrounding Amitayus are also representations of Amitayus.



9 CHAKRA SAMVARA

18th Century, Central Tibet

One of the main Yidams of the New Translation (Sarma) tradition, Samvara is especially revered by the Gelugpa and the Kagyudpa sects. Samvara's home, the top of Kailas in the Himalayas, coincides with Mt. Meru, the center of the Universe. Kailas and the surrounding area is considered one of the most sacred places of pilgrimage in Western Tibet. Milarepa spent much time there with his disciples and displayed the superiority of Buddhism over Pon, an indigenous shaminism of Tibet. Above Samvara is the Dalai Lama while below rides Vaisravana.



10 GUHYA SAMAJA

18th Century, Mongolia

Guhya Samaja is the central deity and the main subject
of a Tantra of this same name. This is one of the main Tantras
studied and practiced by the Mahasiddas of India.
These Buddhist yogins attained highest perfection (Mahasiddhi)
by turning their work into meditation.
Upper left is Dorje Chang, the Adi
Buddha of the Gelugpa, Sakyapa and Kagyudpa sects. Clockwise
is Amitayus, Boundless Life, and two forms of Mahakala
previously discussed.



11 YAMANTAKA

19th Century, Central Tibet

Yamantaka is the wrathful form of Manjushri and represents wisdom that subdues death. In Vajrayana, death is actually only a change from a seemingly stable existence to an unstable one. If one truly understands that each passing moment represents the death of the past one and the birth seed of the next one, then through precise wisdom one attains power over death, or rather death ceases to have power over the person. Clockwise overhead are the Panchen Rinpoche, White Tara, Chang Kya Rol Pai Dorje, a very great scholar, Usnishavijaya and Four-Arm Avalokitesvara, of whom the Dalai Lama is an incarnation.



12 VAJRAPANI

19th Century, Central Tibet

As the unfolder of the Tantras, Vajrapani is important to Vajrayana Buddhism. Overhead is Padma Sambhava with Vimalamitra and Amitabha to the left of him while Tri Srong Detsan and White Tara are to his right. Below Vajrapani are from the right: four-armed Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Divine Compassion, a Choden representing the mind of the Buddha, Vajrasattva of immutable purification, and Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Divine Wisdom. The thanka is probably Nyingmapa from or around Mindroling Monastery in Central Tibet.



13 YAMANTAKA

18th Century, Mongolia

The central figure is Yamantaka, the wrathful form of Manjushri, and the peaceful uppermost head of Yamantaka portrays the Buddha of Divine Wisdom. Tsong-Ka Pa is pictured above left. Upper left is probably Jetsun Tragpa Gyaltsen, one of the five great Sakya Lamas and an incarnation of Padma Sambhava. Bottom clockwise are Yamaraja, the Lord of Death, who Yamantaka subdues, a tantric offering, in which the five animals represent the five senses, and Vaisravana.



14 YAMANTAKA

18th Century, Central Tibet

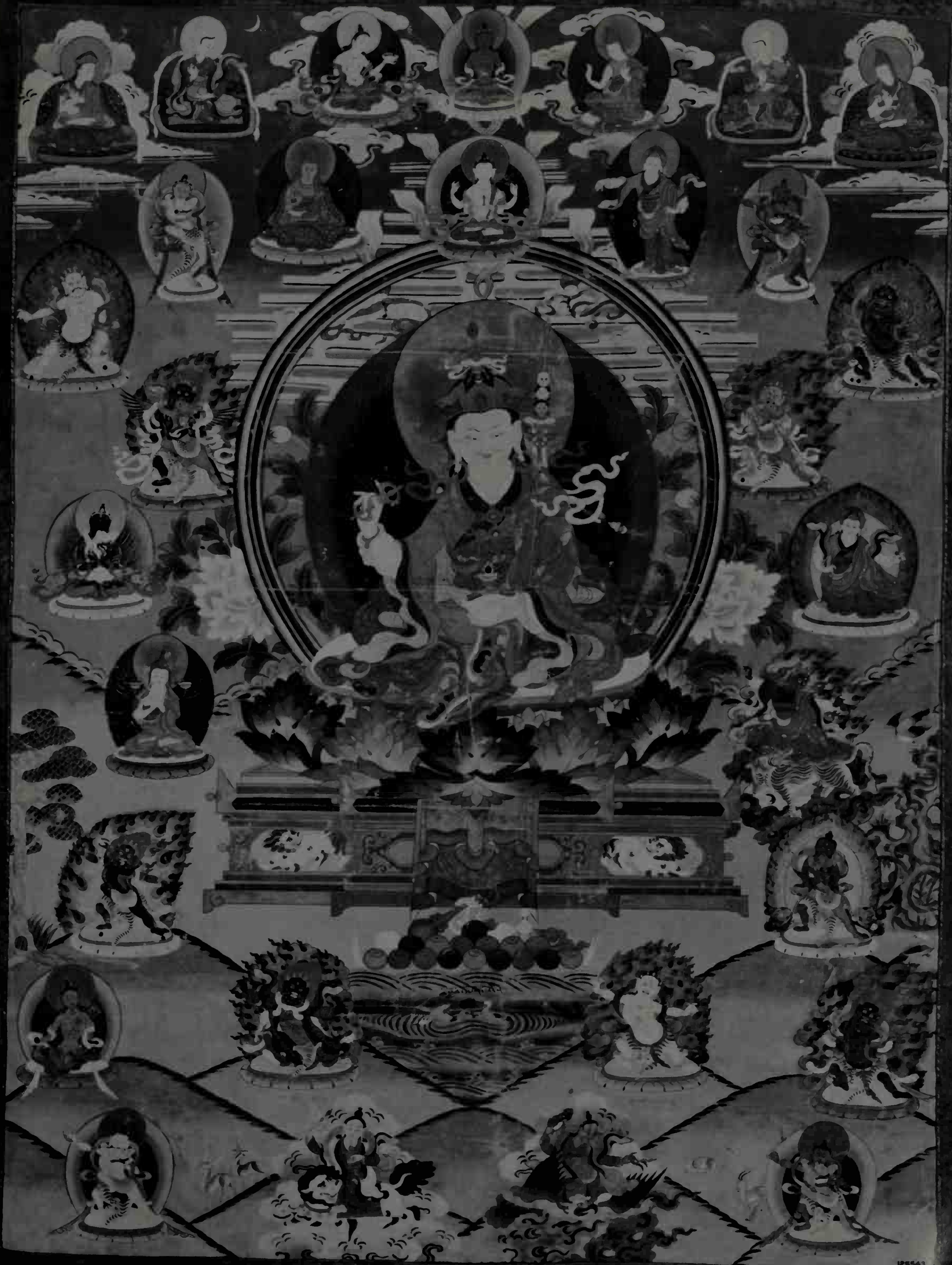
The most notable of the Gelugpa Yidams, Yamantaka's sadhana
was spread and made popular by Tsong-Ka Pa who is enthroned above.
Below Yamantaka is Yama whom Yamantaka subdues. Tantric initiation in the
Gelugpa Sect was usually made possible only after long study and
logical analysis of the Sutras. Once accomplished,
a monk was allowed to enter one of the Tantric colleges.
Such colleges were maintained by all large Gelug monasteries.
The most famous of these was the Gyudto in the Jo Khang in Lhasa.



15 PADMA SAMBHAVA

19th Century, Kham

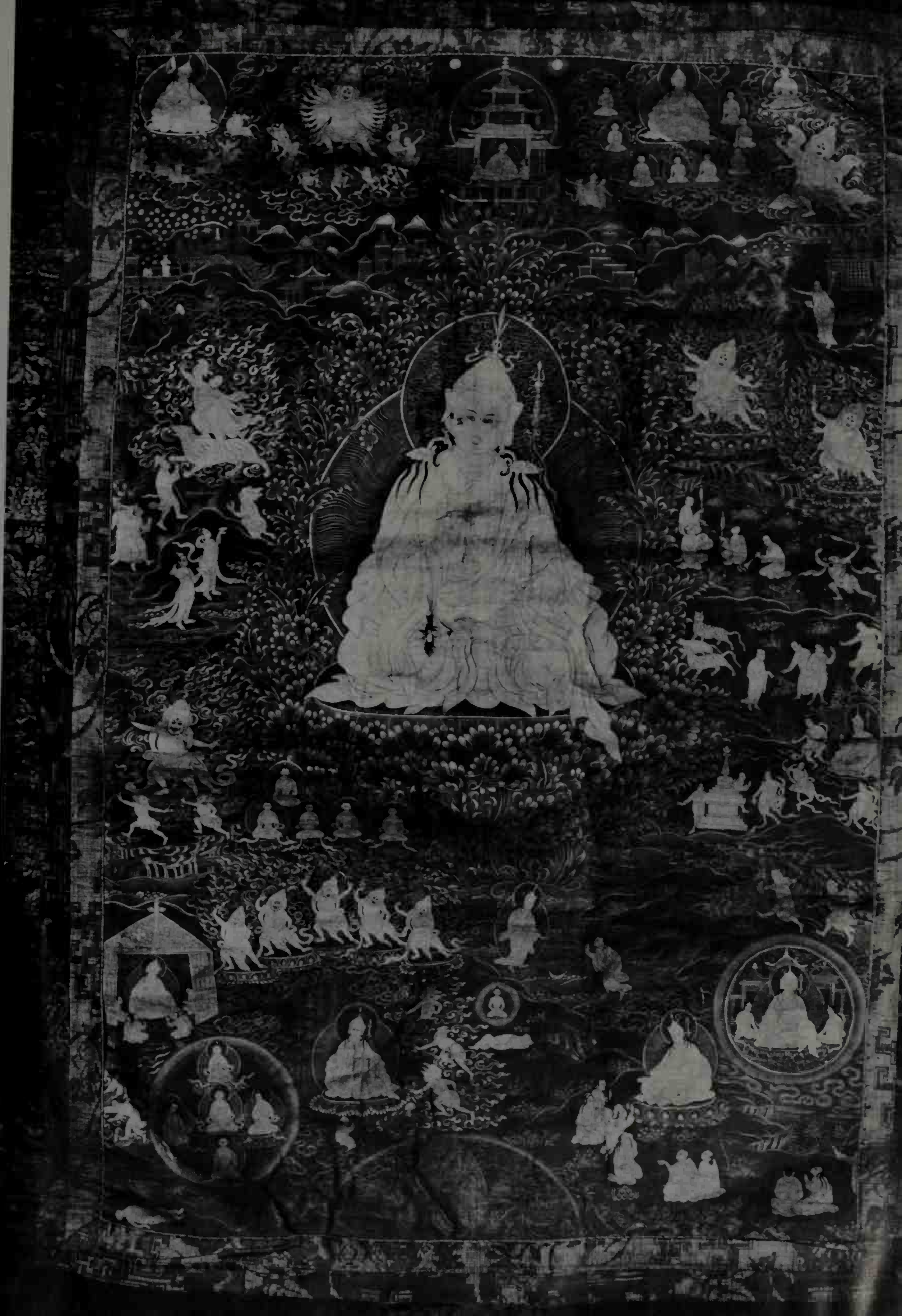
This thanka represents the deities and Lamas of the Nying Tig lineage of Nyingmapa. Around Padma Sambhava are his peaceful and wrathful manifestations. Jig Med Lingpa (far upper left) was a reincarnation of Long Chen Pa and probably the highest Lama of the 18th Century. Jam Yang Kentse Wang Po (far upper right) is the bodily incarnation of Jig Med Lingpa and the initiator of the Ri Med, or nonsectarian movement, which prescribed the impartial study of the philosophy of all four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism.


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16 PADMA SAMBHAVA

18th Century, Batang Monastery, Kham

This truly beautiful thanka depicts the coming of great Guru
Padma Sambhava to Tibet to bring the Dharma to the Tibetan
people. Padma Sambhava is in
Nga Yab Pema, Padma Sambhava's paradise. The wrathful figures
represent transformations of the Guru to subdue the local
demons. Other parts illustrate various other episodes
in the Guru's Biography.
Lower left the Guru gives the teaching of the Bardo and the mandalas of the
peaceful and wrathful deities. Lower right the Guru gives his blessing.
Padma Sambhava was the founder of the Nyingma Sect.



17 PADMA SAMBHAVA AND THE EIGHT MANIFESTATIONS
18th Century, Western Tibet

Surrounding Padma Sambhava are his eight manifestations,
each relating to a different portion of the Guru's life.
Overhead is Urgyan Dorje Chang, or Padma Sambhava as the primordial Buddha.
To the right of Urgyan Dorje Chang is pictured Guru Loden Chog Se, or the
Guru Endowed with Understanding the Highest Wishes. Under him
is seated Guru Padma Gyalpo, the Lotus King Guru. Below Guru Pema Gyalpo,
Mandarava offers Amrita to the Guru. Mandarava was one of the Guru's two
female disciples. Below her is Guru Dorje Drollo, one of the wrathful
manifestations of Padma Sambhava. Clockwise from Dorje Drollo
is Guru Senge Dradog, another of the Guru's wrathful manifestations and
the one he principally used in subduing the local deities when he came to Tibet.
Next to Senge Dradog is Nyima Odzer the Yogi manifestation
of Padma Sambhava. Above is Yeshe Tsogyal the other female disciple of
Padma Sambhava and one of Tibet's highest Lamas. Just above her
is Guru Padma Sambhava in the form of a young monk and above him is
the Guru as Shakya Senge, or the Lion of the Shakyas, the clan that
Lord Buddha was born into for the last time.



18 GREEN TARA

18th Century, Kham Province

Here, Tara is again depicted saving one of her devotees from a demon which is out of the picture in this detail. This form of Tara is very unusual for Tara is rarely portrayed standing. This reflects some of the Chinese elements in Kham style thanka painting. The leaves under Tara, instead of the more traditional lotus, come down from the Tang Dynasty style representation of Buddhist deities. The extreme grace of both figure and robes and lack of complete Samboghakaya ornaments also reflects this influence.



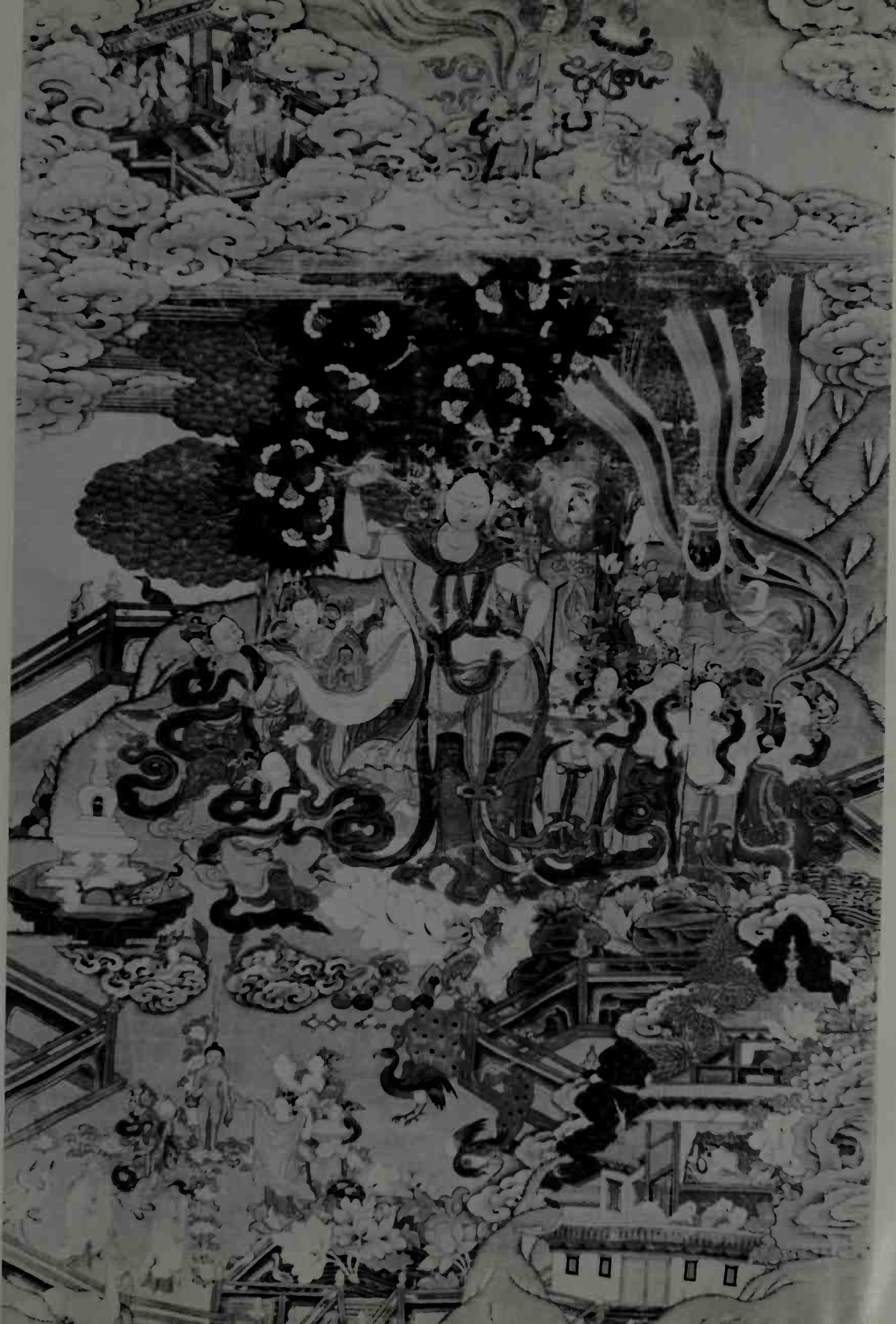


19a Detail of the Bodhisattva descending into the womb of Maya.

19 THE BODHISATTVA'S LAST BIRTH

18th Century, Derge

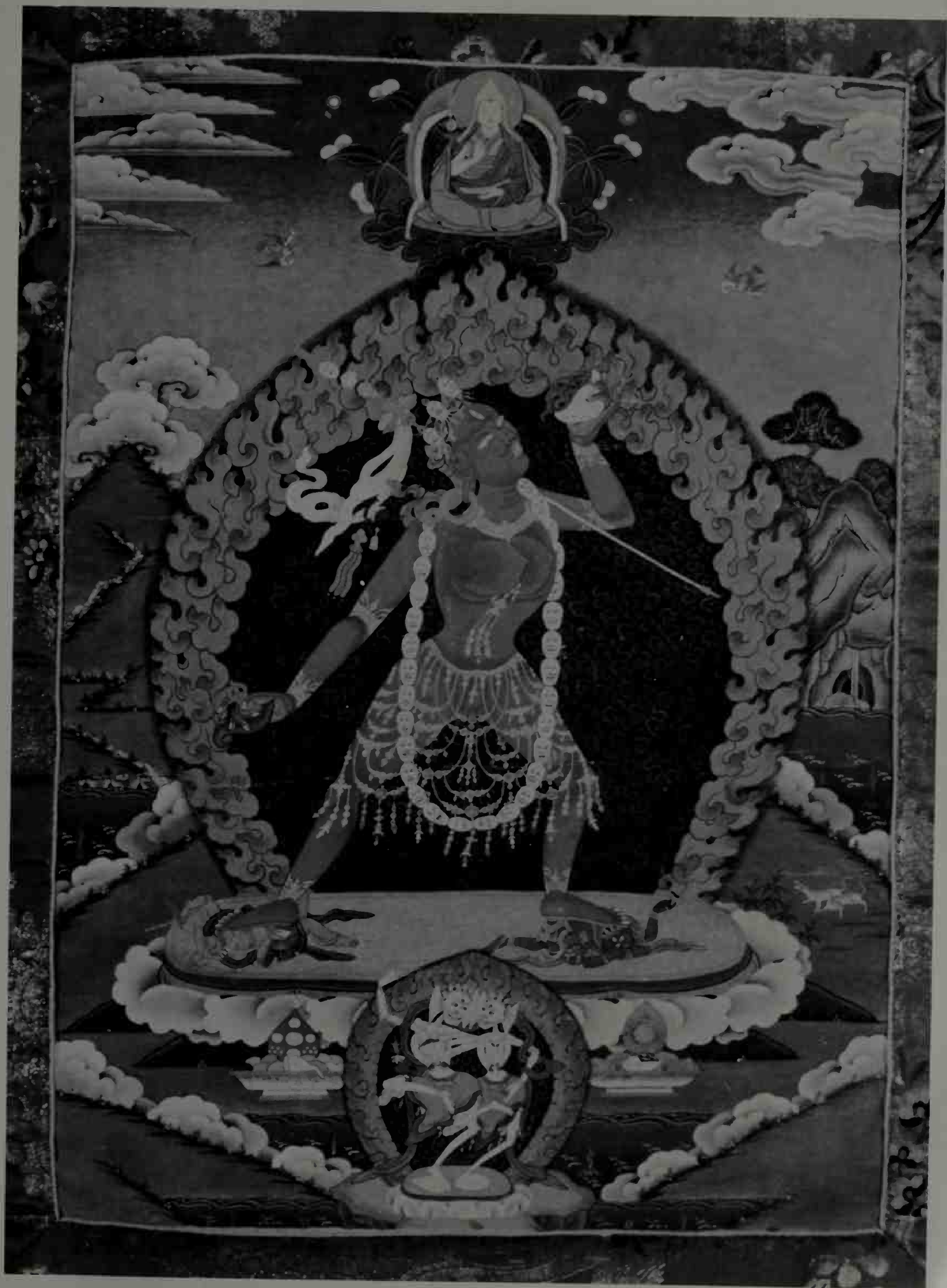
Painted from a set of blocks carved in Derge in the 17th Century, this thanka represents the last birth of the Bodhisattva who is to become the Lord Buddha. Upper left he leaves Tushita heaven and in the form of a white elephant enters the womb of Queen Maya, lower right. He is born from the side of Maya, center, and it is Indra with three faces who receives the Bodhisattva. Lower left, the Bodhisattva takes seven steps and is annointed by heavenly beings as he declares his last birth.



20 *NARO KHA CHOD MA*

18th Century, Central Tibet

Naro Kha Chod Ma, or Naro the sky cleaver, was the special form of Vajra Yogini propitiated by Naropa. She is the central deity involved in the Six Yogas of Naropa. Naropa was a Mahasiddha and his disciple, Marpa, was the Guru of Milarepa. Naropa was famed for successfully undertaking the twelve great and twenty-four lesser trials under his Guru Tilopa, another of the Eighty-four Mahasiddhas. Dorje Pagmo, another form of Vajra Yogini, successively incarnates as the Abbess of Sam-Ding Monastery in Central Tibet. Above Naro is the 7th Dalai Lama and below dance the Citipati.



21 KURUKULA

18th Century. Central Tibetan

Kurukula is a wrathful manifestation of Tara and is considered in some instances both a Yidam and a Dharmapala. Above is the 7th Dalai Lama and below is Palden Lhamo, the protector of the Dalai Lamas.





22 FOUR ARHATS
19th Century, entral Tibet

Clockwise from the top left are pictured four of Lord Buddha's disciples: Angja, Ajita, Vanavasin and Kalika. The central figure is an attendant of Ajita and lives in a smaller hut than his master. In the upper right corner is Ratnasambhava. Arhats are saints and disciples of Lord Buddha who follow the path of Hinayana. The enlightenment of an Arhat can be compared to a resting place where they reside until compassion arises and Buddhahood is accomplished for the good of all beings.

22a. Detail of Kalika being presented with an offering.



23 ABHAYA KARA GUPTA

Early 20th Century, Central Tibet

Abhaya Kara Gupta was the fourth Indian incarnation of the Panchen Rinpoche. Also known as the Tashi Lama, he was declared an emanation of Amitabha by the 5th Dalai Lama, a disciple of one of the Panchen Rinpoche's incarnations. Abhaya Kara Gupta lived in the 9th century and was attached to Vikranashila monastery in India. Vajrayogini (upper left) appeared to Abhaya Kara Gupta and proclaimed that he would receive the siddhi of fore-knowledge in the bardo, the intermediate state between death and rebirth. Over Abhaya Kara Gupta's head is one of the Eighty-four Maha-siddhas, probably Luipada, who also lived in India about this time. Below Abhaya Kara Gupta is Mahakala in the form of a Dharmapala (Religious Protector) propitiated by the Gelugpa Sect. The snake around Abhaya Kara Gupta expresses that he had power over the Nagas and obtained the siddhi of curing snake bites. The monk (bottom left) holding the door open shows that Abhaya Kara Gupta liberated many beings from the lower realms.

This thanka belongs to a set which came from blocks cut in Narthang Monastery in Central Tibet during the 17th Century, and represents the incarnations of the Panchen Rinpoche. Narthang was the Gelugpa's greatest printing establishment. The blocks were printed onto cloth and the cloth painted. A set of thankas painted in this manner were taken to Peking by His Holiness the 13th Dalai Lama around the turn of the 20th century and the Peking weavers of the Manchu Dynasty made woven copies of these on their looms. This thanka is from a set of those woven copies.

Stylistically, the whole set reflects the Chinese influence present in Central Tibet during the 17th Century.



24 GREEN TARA

Early 19th Century, Central Tibet

Green Tara is the central female deity worshipped in Tibet. She is an emanation of Avalokitesvara and is considered the Mother of all Buddhas. She is also the Yum reflex of Amoghasiddhi. In the thanka she is represented in her paradise, blessing and saving those who pray to her.



From the great ocean vapors rise,
Reaching the vast sky.
They form great clouds;
A causal law governs the transformations
of the elements.

In midsummer, rainbows appear above the plain,
Gently resting upon the hills.
Of the plains and mountains,
The rainbow is the beauty and adornment.

I, the Yogi who desires to remain in solitude,
Meditate on the Voidness of Mind.
Awed by the power of my concentration,
You jealous demons are forced to practice magic.
Of the yogi, demonic conjurations
Are the beauty and adornment.

Milarepa

25 MILAREPA
20th Century, Padma Ling Monastery

Milarepa is often referred to as Naljor Wang Chuk, or the Lord of Yogins. He proved that for an ordinary person Vajrayana can lead to Buddhahood in one lifetime. Once when Milarepa was growing old, one of his disciples asked him whose incarnation he was since it was inconceivable that an ordinary person could show such strength of purpose. Milarepa denied that he was anything but an ordinary person and stated that this kind of thinking only displays a lack of faith in the short path of the Vajrayana. The Kagyudpa lineage is traced through Milarepa and his closest disciple, Gampopa.



26 HO SHANG AND GUARDIAN KINGS

19th Century, Central Tibet

Taken from a set of blocks representing the disciples of Lord Buddha and the Four Guardian Kings. Ho Shang (above) is shown as the Chinese monk who loves children. Virudhaka (lower left) is the guardian of the south and the King of Khumbanda. Dhritarashtra (lower right) is the guardian king of the east and rules over the Ghandarvas. The Four Guardian Kings are the Protectors of the Dharma in the Four Directions.





...a. Detail of Virudh[illegible]



26b. Detail of Dhritarash

27 MANDALA OF USNISHA VIJAYA

18th Century, Kham Province

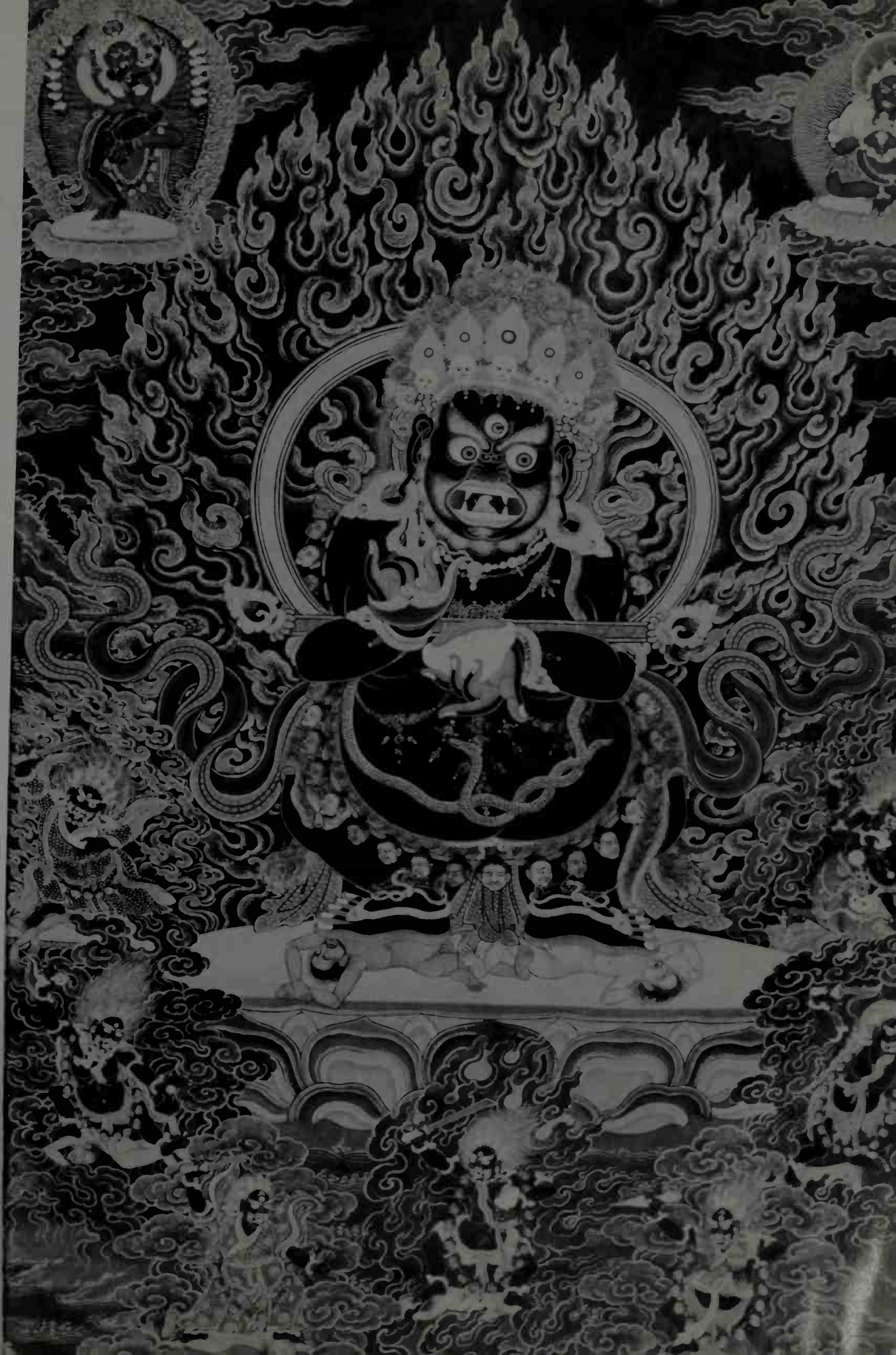
Vijaya is an emanation of the Usnisha, the victorious aspect of the Mind of the Buddha. This aspect cannot be conquered since it is not concerned with whether positive or negative forces are brought to bear in a particular situation. Only the situation itself is considered without judgment of good or bad and as a result any movement is a response to the situation rather than a reaction for or against it. Because Vijaya is an aspect of the Mind of the Buddha, she is often seen in the center of the Choden which symbolizes the Mind.



28 DANDA MAHAKALA

Early 19th Century, Tsang Province

Mahakala is represented in the form of a Gelugpa Dharmapala. Mahakala was an Indian Siddha who vowed to protect the Dharma with wrathful means when compassion failed. In this exercise of skillful means, Mahakala transforms himself into many different forms in order to meet the requirements of any situation. Around the central figure are displayed some of the different emanations Mahakala assumes to meet this purpose. Exceptions are the deity above left, Hevajra with his yum, and above right, Tro Mo Me Tseg.



30 CITIPATI (thanka detail)
19th Century, Central Tibet

The Citipati represent death in its dancing form. Two figures are portrayed because death always deals with dualism. In the background is a carnal ground with carniverous animals searching for corpses. Herein is the end of all existence. The Citipati play a very important part in the monastic dances and their appearance to ignorant observers has helped lead to the gross misnomer of "devil dances."



31 SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA

19th Century, Tsang Province

Shakymuni Buddha is here cast in the "earth-touching mudra" which calls the earth to witness that he is unmoved by the forces of the temptress Mara Kama Deva. As the Lord sat under the Bodhi tree on the Diamond Seat at Bodgaya, Mara came to tempt him so that he might swerve from his goal of ultimate enlightenment for the welfare of all beings. But no matter what forces Mara imposed upon him the Tathagata was unmoved and called the earth to witness this fact. The earth trembled and shook in six ways in answer.



32 RATNA NAGESVARARAJA

15th Century

This is one of the principal members of the thirty-five Buddhas of Confession. Every full and new moon, ordained monks of each monastery gather together and chant the *Prattimoksha*, the 258 precepts of the bikshu, in a ceremony of devotion.



33 SIMHANADA AVALOKITESVARA

18th Century, Peking

This particular form of Avalokitesvara represents the piercing insight aspect of limitless compassion. True compassion is guided by a clear awareness of the situation under which it arises and the activity of compassion is guided by complete awareness of the most effective means. This knowledge delivers a fearless quality which is symbolized by Avalokitesvara riding on the lion, a representation of the fearless proclamation of the Dharma. This proclamation is also all-victorious, for once realized, there is no longer any obstacle that can be found to hinder insight.



34 HAYAGRIVA

18th Century, Kham Province

Known as the "horse-headed one, Hayagriva represents one of the deities of the *Nyingma Gyud Bum* or the Hundred Thousand Tantras of the Nyingma Sect. Only Nyingma revere this set of Tantras and within them lie some of the most profound insights into existence ever written. The *Nyingma Gyud Bum* represents the Tantras translated at the time of Padma Sambhava. The Sarma or New Translation tradition was started by Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo in the 11th century.



35 YAMARAJA YAB-YUM

19th Century, Central Tibet

The statue depicts Yamaraja, the Lord of Death, embracing his yum or wisdom-consort Yami. They ride the Bull of Death. This is the outer form of Yama and represents Death in its outward aspect, the aspect generally feared by common man. Yama, in the form of Dharmaraja, judges the dead in the bardo and determines the proper rebirth for each person by looking into the Mirror of Karma and viewing the totality of a person's past actions, good, bad and neutral. His decision determines in which of the six realms of existence the person will be reborn.



36 TSONG-KA PA

17th Century, Central Tibet.

Tsong-Ka Pa was the founder of the Gelugpa Sect and in 1409 established Gaden Monastery east of Lhasa. Tsong-Ka Pa was also known as Lo Zang Tragpa, but in Tibet he was simply called Je Rinpoche or Precious Lord. A Manjushri incarnation, he firmly established the Gelugpa philosophy of the slower and less dangerous path to enlightenment in his two greatest works, the *Lam Rim Chenmo* (*The Great Stages of the Path*) and the *Ngag-Rim* (*The Stages of Mantra*). Tsong-Ka Pa was born in Amdo in 1357 and received instruction from Lamas of the Nyingma, Kagyudpa and Kadampa sects. He went on to reform the Kadampa Sect which was established in the 12th Century by Jowo Atisha and changed the color of their hats to yellow. Thereafter, the Gelugpa became known as the "Shar ser" or Yellow Hats.



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